DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 449 111 SO 032 509

AUTHOR	Henderson, Anne
TITLE	The Imaginary World of Henri Rousseau. Teacher's Guide. School Arts: Looking/Learning.
INSTITUTION	National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	1999-03-00
NOTE	10p.; For other guides from the same preparing institution, see SO 032 504-508. Some photographs may not reproduce well.
AVAILABLE FROM	National Gallery of Art, 4th and Constitution Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20565. For full text: http://www.nga.gov/education/teachres.htm.
PUB TYPE	Guides - Classroom - Teacher (052)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Art Activities; *Art History; *Artists; Elementary Secondary Education; *Painting (Visual Arts); Surrealism
IDENTIFIERS	*Artistic Style; Nineteenth Century; *Rousseau (Henri)

ABSTRACT

While Henri Rousseau's work was not easily classified into any definitive artistic style of the time--impressionism, post-impressionism, fauvism, or cubism--it has been considered a forerunner of surrealism because of its dreamlike sensibility. This teaching guide provides information about Rousseau and his work, focusing on "Tropical Forest with Monkeys." The guide also discusses the key concepts in Rousseau's painting. It provides photographs of five of Rousseau's works and suggests activities for elementary school, middle school, and high school. (BT)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 449 111

The Imaginary World of Henri Rousseau

A Guide for Teachers

Henri Rousseau, Tropical Forest with Monkeys, 1910

SO 032 509

F. P. Smith

1

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

The Imaginary World of Henri Rousseau

Teacher's Guide

This teaching guide was prepared by Anne Henderson, Head of the Department of Teacher and School programs at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. Additional information is available on the National Gallery's web site at **http://www.nga.gov**

Copyright ©1999 National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.

The Imaginary World of Henri Rousseau

Nothing makes me happier than to contemplate nature and to paint it.

--Henri Rousseau

Most accounts of Henri Rousseau either mention or allude to his naivete and his child-like innocence. While Rousseau's work was not easily classified into any definitive artistic style of the time--impressionism, post-impressionism, fauvism or cubism--it has been considered a forerunner of surrealism because of its dream-like sensibility. Rousseau showed his paintings at progressive exhibitions such as the Salon des Indépendants and the Salon d'Automne. Although critics ridiculed his efforts, he never lost confidence in his own ability and even saved his reviews in a scrapbook. He was a favorite of the Parisian avant-garde artists and literary figures who admired his work for its simultaneously primitive and modern qualities. At the time of his death in 1910, Rousseau's paintings had begun to sell. A monograph of his work was published the following year, further promoting his reputation

About the Artist

Born in 1844 in the city of Lavel, in northwest France, Rousseau's student years were unremarkable. However, he did win a competition for vocal music and one for drawing. His interest in music continued throughout his life. He even composed and published a waltz named for his wife, Clémence. After two stints in the military between 1864-1871, Roussseau became a toll collector for the city of Paris. His colleagues nicknamed him Le Douanier, which means customs official, a position far grander than the one he actually held. His simple job of collecting taxes on goods coming into the city allowed him to support his wife and nine children, while giving him time to pursue his true passion art.

From his stations at the toll gates at the Auteuil Embankment and the Vanves Gate, Rousseau observed the world around him and filled numerous notebooks with drawings. He noted that "my superiors at the tollgate used to assign me to less demanding duties so that I would find it easier to work." At age forty-nine, Rousseau retired from the customs service to become a full-time artist. He settled in the Plaisance section of Paris a poor working-class neighborhood behind Montparnasse. Here he found a one-room studio where he was surrounded by his art.

Although he often copied art in the Louvre, Rousseau was essentially self-taught. He frequently strolled through the suburbs of Paris, sketching from nature. He wrote: "Nothing makes me happier than to contemplate nature and to paint it. Would you believe it that when I go out in the country and see all that sun, all that greenery and ali those flowers, I sometimes say to myself: 'All that belongs to me, it does.'"

Rousseau's explorations included visiting the hothouses at the Exposition Universelle in

1889 and the Jardin des Plantes, a botanical garden in Paris which also houses a zoo. There, he was able to study and draw exotic plants and caged animals. Rousseau's interest in nature was translated into paintings that reveal his keen attention to the individual details of leaves and trees, and to various species of exotic animals.

Rousseau's work was championed by contemporaries including artists Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Edgar Degas, Odilon Redon, Paul Gauguin and the poet Guillaume Apollinaire. They admired the imaginary settings, the lack of adherence to a precise and strict style, and the dream-like quality of Rousseau's paintings. After his first visit to Rousseau's studio, the artist Max Weber wrote that he felt he had been "favoured by the gods to meet one of the most inspiring and precious personalities in all Paris..." Pablo Picasso and Wassily Kandinsky both insisted on owning Rousseau's works, and Picasso gave a banquet for him.

The Work

n the last months of his life, Rousseau painted Tropical Forest with Monkeys. His style had not changed dramatically since the beginning of his career. In this work, exotic animals are surrounded by lush plants that create the impression of a jungle. Upon close inspection, however, the viewer discovers the foliage is not a realistic interpretation of tropical vegetation. Based upon the exotic plants seen at the Jardin des Plantes, Rousseau took these specimens as inspiration and then vastly enlarged and domesticated them to create his jungle. The plants are painted in wide flat brushstrokes in various shades of greens to create the tonal qualities of the dense forest.

The shapes and images are painted with little shadowing, giving an overall stage-like effect.

A horizontal band of large red-leafed plants on the left side of the work is highlighted by large white lotus flowers rising behind them, emphasizing a sense of the exotic. The lotuses are unusual since their blooms rise high above the water surface; in reality, they should float on top of the water. Through a small clearing in the plants, one sees a brown macaque monkey sitting on a rock in a stream. Under his legs is a green bamboo-like pole. To the right of the macaque, a row of yellow-orange lotus flowers leads the viewer back to two orange gibbon monkeys swinging through the trees. (Notice the addition of the tails to the normally tailless animals.)

The macaque's eyes dart to the left, drawing the viewer's gaze to a black-and-white langur monkey sitting on a branch, scratching his head and holding a pole. This pole has a string on the end, and it is evident that the monkey is fishing. Behind the langur, the viewer discovers another black monkey of indeterminate species sitting on a branch peering at something below him.

The monkeys appear childlike in their play, swinging from branch to branch, and lazily fishing in the water. Yet, there is an air of apprehension in the jungle. The monkeys are aware of another presence. A snake is spotted slithering among the white lotuses,

perhaps posing a danger to the monkeys. How is the viewer to interpret this intruder? What is the object of the snake's attention and what will be the result of this encounter?

The monkeys depicted here actually inhabit various parts of Asia and Africa and could only come together in a book, a zoo, or an artist's imagination. Found in Rousseau's studio at the time of his death was an illustrated book of exotic animals--Wild Beasts: Approximately 200 Amusing Illustrations Drawn from the Life of Animals, with an Instructive Text. Rousseau transformed images from this book into the animals that populate his imaginary jungles. All five primates here are derived from photographs in Wild Beasts. Copying images from other sources was a common technique for Rousseau's working style. He translated the figure from its original setting into an imaginary world, thereby creating a new interpretation of reality.

For example, in the illustrated book, the macaque sitting on a stone with its feet dangling in the brook originally was shown with its arms and legs through the bars of its cage. The playful pair of gibbons is actually a doubled, topsy-turvy version of one photograph of a zookeeper stretching an animal's arms out to their full length.

Key Concepts

Rousseau's work was regarded by his contemporaries as innovative. His figures are somewhat flattened representations occupying an unrealistically shallow space. The surrealists saw his jungle works, in particular, as examples of non-traditional inspiration. Rousseau's paintings reflect a childlike approach, a sense of absurdity, a dream-like quality, and contextual ambiguity. In Tropical Forest with Monkeys, these elements include the playful, childlike monkeys, the absurd notion of monkeys fishing with poles, and the unrealistic assemblage of plants that are not really tropical, but nevertheless seem like a jungle interior. Rousseau's fantastical paintings bridge the transition from realistic and academic art of the nineteenth-century to the modernist directions of the twentieth century.

The Imaginary World of Henri Rousseau

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

Captions

1. Boy on the Rocks, 1895/1897, oil on linen, 1963.10.63
2. The Equatorial Jungle, 1909, oil on canvas, 1963.10.213
3. Rendezvous in the Forest, 1889, oil on canvas, 1972.9.20
4. Tropical Forest with Monkeys, 1910, oil on canvas, 1982.76.7
5. La Guerre (The War), c. 1895, lithograph on orange paper, 1964.8.1502

Surrealism

This international movement of the early twentieth century in literature and the visual arts was centered mainly in Paris. The intent of surrealism was to allow thoughts to be expressed free of any control in an "automatic" manner, flowing from the subconscious which had recently become a subject of intense interest due to the publication of Sigmund Freud's Interpretation of Dreams (1900). Surrealists used techniques such as unlikely juxtapositions, distortions of reality, elements of surprise, and dream-like imagery to create their works.

ACTIVITIES

Elementary

Have students select an animal to study in detail including where the animal lives, its habitat and its behavior. Students should present their information as a written report. As part of the report, have students create a collage, locating images of the animal and its habitat in magazines. In addition to researching information at the library, students may want to search the Internet for web sites featuring their animal. If possible, have students plan a trip to the local zoo.

Middle School

Using a reproduction of Tropical Forest with Monkeys, have students write as many descriptive words and phrases as possible about the image. Working individually or in pairs, students should then build upon these observations to create an imaginary story about the monkeys in the painting. They may consider writing a cartoon script with the monkeys and snake as central characters. The plot should include location, story line, and character development.

High School

Have students investigate how Rousseau's work influenced surrealist artists and writers. Ask them to select one of the following artists or authors and research how this individual relates to the surrealist movement: Henri Rousseau, Salvador Dali, Giorgio de Chirico, André Breton, Guillaume Apollinaire, Jean Cocteau, Max Ernst. Students should describe how Rousseau's work anticipates that of the surrealists and present their research in class. As an extension of the study, encourage students to create their own surrealistic world inhabited by animals. The animals may have human characteristics and traits. Ask students to illustrate their imaginary world through a painting, a collage, or a written description.

Resources

Alley, Ronald. Portrait of a Primitive: The Art of Henri Rousseau. Oxford: Phaidon Presses Ltd., 1978.

Shattuck, Roger. The Banquet Years: The Origins of the Avant Garde in France, 1885 to World War I. New York: Vintage Books, Alfred A. Knopf, and Random House, 1968.

Vallier, Dora. Henri Rousseau. New York: Crown Publishers, 1979.